

Recollections and Letters of Bret Harte

AMONG the earliest memories of my childhood there stands out the image of a beautiful St. Bernard dog. Her name was Jungfrau, and with her is associated my first recollection of Bret Harte.

I was quite a little girl when one day we children were told that a distinguished stranger was coming to visit our parents. He had come from far, from the Wild West of America; he was going to give a lecture in the town (Birmingham), and would afterward spend the night at our house. Long before the hour of his arrival I had gone to bed—no doubt speculating timidly on the coming of a "cowboy" of the Buffalo Bill type, armed to the teeth with pistols and bowie knives—so did not make his acquaintance until the next morning. When the breakfast bell rang I went cautiously into the dining room. A man with thick, curly, brown hair, wearing a brown velvet coat, was standing in the recess of the bay window. Fear, shyness vanished; I liked him at once; He was caressing Jungfrau, who was gazing up at him with the intense look of adoration mingled with bewilderment so characteristic of her species. I drew near and was greeted with kind words spoken in an attractively soft, whimsical voice, and kind blue eyes looked down into mine. This is my first recollection of Bret Harte, whom I was to know so well many years later. He had evidently lost his heart to Jungfrau and before he left us he begged to be allowed to have one of her puppies should she ever become the mother of a family.

Time passed, and on one never to be forgotten day we children were shown three fascinating balls of fur, tipped with little wrinkled noses, and mouths that twisted and squeaked with hungry anticipation: Jungfrau's puppies! They were named Shem, Ham and Japheth. I do not know why, except that the names come easily in connection with a well known trio. "Which will be Mr. Bret Harte's puppy?" one of us asked, for we had not forgotten him or his request. "He shall choose between Shem and Ham," said my father. "Japheth is already promised."

We eagerly awaited the decision, for the puppy Bret Harte did not choose was to remain in the family circle. After a few days a letter came from him—from Crefeld in Germany.

UNITED STATES CONSULATE,
CREFELD, May 25, 1879.

MY DEAR PEMBERTON:

I think I prefer, all things considered, "Shem." "Ham" might be preferable if he had the color attributed by the best authorities to his Noachian namesake. A black St. Bernard would be as beautiful and as terrible as a thunderstorm. But I am very grateful, my dear fellow, for "Shem." "Shem" let it be, then. Vivat, Shem!

You have forgotten to tell me how old he is. So I cannot tell if he will be able to bear the fatigue and excitement of Continental travel. I don't want to expose him prematurely to foreign temptation and habits without some previous home experience, or to take him from you and his mother rashly. Therefore, please let me know at once. Meanwhile consider him *mine*; act for me vicariously; let him have the best at my expense.

Procure for him a collar with a silver plate—not too expensive, but suitable to my degree, and his—which shall bear the legend: "Shem." Let him do as he likes, short of active aggression upon the persons of your family, and—send the bill to me.

Yours ever,

BRET HARTE.

So it was decided; Shem was to go out into the world and become the property of a well known master. But he was not to leave us for some time, apparently, for when he was five months old Bret Harte wrote as follows:

CREFELD, February 27th, 1880.

MY DEAR PEMBERTON:

Pray do not for one instant give way to the belief that I have forgotten "Shem" or his kind entertainers. Only the fact that I have asked my Government for an "exchange" from Crefeld, and am now waiting to know where I am to go, has kept me from sending for him. As matters stand I must ask you to bear with him and his discomfiting greatness a little longer. I should not like a good dog to share the uncertainties of an American official.

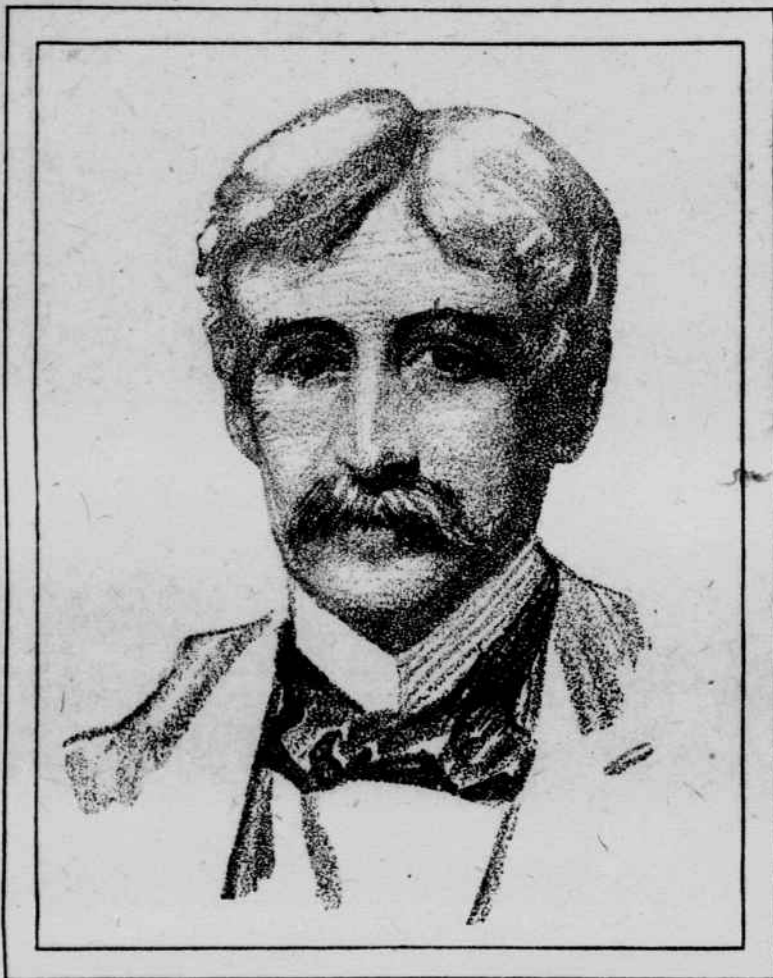
By MAY PEMBERTON.

In Two Parts. Part I.

But I am delighted to hear of his progress—his physical welfare and his moral advancements. Yet, my dear Pemberton, you say nothing of his *spiritual* tendencies. Does he know the interior of a church? Can I take him into a cathedral with me (if it were large enough)? Has he ever been known to bark at a Bishop or a beneficed clergyman? These are not light questions, but momentous ones! A terror of my acquaintance has been known to follow a priest two squares, violently objecting to him, and has gone out of his way in a cathedral to insult the hypocritically crossed legs of the effigy of a Crusader!

fatted calf, etc., etc." but, alas, when I came to London I fell into evil ways and did nothing. Many times since then I have made good resolutions regarding Shem's future, and forgotten them. I have talked about him and what I was going to do with him until I have become burdensome to my friends. I was on the point of writing to you when my colleague, King, of Birmingham wrote to me that he had seen and been nearly knocked down by Shem!

I was at the Queen's Hotel, Glasgow, one night last week and left my card there for two Pembertons (thinking



Francis Bret Harte

I am coming to Oxford and Cambridge to lecture after Easter . . . somewhere about that time I shall visit you and "Shem." But of this more particularly later.

Pat Shem's head for me gently, but not patronizingly, and read him this letter. Make my best regards to your wife and say I have not forgotten the pleasant time I spent in her household at Birmingham.

In haste, yours always,

BRET HARTE.

Easter came and went and Shem remained a member of our household, growing each day dearer to us all. But the disposal of three large St. Bernard dogs in a moderate size suburban house had become a problem, so my father wrote an urgent letter to Bret Harte, inclosing a photograph of Shem. He received the following reply:

INNELLAN, September 16th, 1880.

MY DEAR PEMBERTON:

When I took up the photograph of the noble Shem and read the few gentle, reproachful lines you had written on its back I realized for the first time what a thoroughly abject villain I was. How could I have basely abandoned that beautiful and gifted creature? How could I oblige you to remind me of my duties during these long months? I stand powerless to excuse myself.

I am an unnatural parent, an ungrateful master, a fraudulent and hypocritical guardian! Can you forgive me? Do you think Shem can? Will he not secretly despise me? Will he not give me a bad character to other dogs?

When I left Crefeld three months ago I thought of him and you, and said to my feeble soul: "I will arise and go to Shem and those who abide with him even at Birmingham, and take him to Glasgow with me and let him kill a

one of them might be you and possibly the other, Shem), whose names were on the register.

I have as yet no settled habitation, but have been staying at Innellan—a lovely little watering place on the Clyde, an hour and a half from Glasgow, where I go every day. This fact I suppose is the potential reason why I don't send for Shem at once. I have been hoping that some of my relations would come to Glasgow this year and justify my setting up a home. But as soon as I have a home Shem must share it with me.

Will you send me a couple more photographs of Shem? I want to send one to my family in America.

Don't be alarmed if you should hear of my having nearly blown the top of my head off. Last Monday while out shooting at C—House I had my face badly cut by the recoil of an overloaded gun. I do not yet know beneath these bandages whether I shall be permanently marked. At present I am impermanently barked. When the surgeon was stitching me together, the son of the house, a boy of twelve, came timidly to the door of my room. "Tell Mr. Bret Harte it's all right," he said; "he killed the hare!"

In haste, yours ever,

BRET HARTE.

But the "home" did not materialize as soon as Bret Harte had hoped, and it seemed as if Shem might, after all, stay permanently with us. My father made the suggestion to his friend that it would perhaps be better for him to have another St. Bernard puppy which would be more convenient to take about than the now full grown, handsome Shem. The reply to this letter was written from a friend's house in London.

15 UPPER HAMILTON TERRACE, N. W.,
December 1st, 1881.

MY DEAR PEMBERTON:

No—'tis I who should do the apologetic thing to you and be absolutely servile to Shem for my unnatural neglect of you both. Intercede for me with my noble enemy and nobler animal.

How good in you to be so patient with the fountling. Thoughtful and considerate as your suggestions are, I still think I must cling to Shem, my first love, though I have never seen him and he might aggressively cling to me on our first meeting. Better is the adolescent Shem than a puppy in *futuro*; better a living dog than one in *utero*. Besides, the Jungfrau may, like other mountains, be delivered of a mouse.

I could not keep him in lodgings in Glasgow without armor-plating the furniture and enlarging the doors, but some kind friends with whom I stay when in London are most anxious to keep him for me. They have a goodish-sized house here in St. John's Wood and nine (!) playful children who are ready to worship him. You may say to Shem that they are a genteel and even a titled family; I would not introduce him to other, or cast the slightest shadow on his brilliant London future.

Now, seriously, how could I get him here—by express to the address, or by parcel delivery or freight? Nothing should I like better than to bring him myself, but I have already outstayed my "leave" and must return to Glasgow in a few days. I expect to come to London again to spend the Christmas holidays. Could I take you *en route*?

With best regards to Mrs. Pemberton and a shake of Shem's paw—always

His and your friend,

BRET HARTE.

At this point in the correspondence another friend of ours cast longing eyes on Shem and offered him a good and immediate home; and Ham, grown to vast proportions, began to dominate over Shem and make his life a burden. A crisis seemed at hand. The matter was laid frankly before Bret Harte, and he wrote:

GLASGOW, February 7th, 1883.

MY DEAR PEMBERTON:

I am heartbroken! What shall I say? What do you say? What, alas, will Shem say? Will he not be glad to get rid of such an unnatural master?

Perhaps it is for the best that he should abandon me. I never should have dared to look him in the face. As it is I never have met a dog in the streets but I have been bathed in blushes. Whenever I take my walks abroad I tremble to meet him and have him openly denounce and expose me to other dogs as a disgrace to my kind. I never hear a ring at the door bell without expecting the servant to enter and say: "Please, sir, 'ere's a big dog a sittink and howlink on the doorstep with Mr. Pemberton's compliments, and what you're a-goin' to do about it?"

And yet I have been base enough to be proud of him, to boast of him and magnify his proportions. If the conversation turned on big dogs I always said: "Ah, but you should see *mine*!" When pressed to exhibit this abnormal growth I meekly said: "He is staying with one of my most intimate friends, to whom he is deeply attached." And then the silent wings of disbelief would gradually unfold that company, and I would disappear.

Seriously, my dear fellow, I am such a homeless vagabond and wanderer myself that unless Shem actually did the St. Bernard Hospice business for me and carried me about with him—and a flask—I don't see what I could do with him just now. I couldn't carry him about, nor would he be content to live in the corridor of my hotel at Glasgow. My fond hope was to place him with some of my suburban friends and visit him two or three times a week, but that is past and I fear he is getting too old now to attach himself to me after that "occasional" fashion. If you will keep your promise and give me a puppy to take his place, I promise to make amends by undertaking his early education *myself* this time.

I hope to come your way in a few weeks, and we will discuss this further. . . . Until then give him my love and say, if needs be, "Hail and Farewell" for me. . . .

Always, my dear Pemberton,

Your friend, BRET HARTE.

This, I fancy, was the conclusion of the whole matter. I find no more allusions to St. Bernard dogs among the many letters of my father's friend, and I have no recollection of the beautiful Jungfrau having a second family. "Shem" found a happy home with Lionel Brough, the actor.

(To Be Concluded).